

Opening Statement of Congressman José E. Serrano of New York
Hearing on H.R. 2420, the National Museum of the American Latino Act
Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Thursday, October 17, 2019
Longworth 1334

Chair Haaland, Ranking Member Young, Chairman Grijalva, and members of the subcommittee, this is an historic day for many of us who have fought for this project. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of H.R. 2420, the National Museum of the American Latino Act.

The effort to establish a Latino Museum started 25 years ago, when Smithsonian released *Willful Neglect*, a report acknowledging a lack of Latino inclusion and setting recommendations to improve it. The most significant step was the creation of the Latino Center in 1997. Its work has led to many exciting new exhibits and opportunities for Latino curators and researchers. However, we could not stop there.

In 2003, former Congressmembers Xavier Becerra of California and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida introduced the first bill in Congress to begin the establishment of a Latino Museum. In 2008, President Bush signed legislation including their language forming a Commission to study its creation. In 2011, the Commission's final report to Congress and President Obama found that a Latino Museum was necessary and feasible, and it laid out a roadmap to help get us there. It has been over eight years since its release.

Last year, the UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Initiative released a report measuring the Smithsonian's progress and found only three of its ten recommendations from the original report had been addressed. That is why passage of H.R. 2420 is critical.

H.R. 2420 will finally authorize the process to create a Latino Museum by establishing a Board of Trustees who will provide recommendations to the Smithsonian Board of Regents on the design, placement, construction, and establishment of a future museum. It will include a diverse set of voices to ensure all parts of the Latino community are represented.

H.R. 2420 authorizes the Smithsonian to undertake a campaign to raise half of the funds necessary to pay for this ambitious endeavor from private sources, while also authorizing federal appropriations for the rest, as is historically done for other museums.

H.R. 2420 also establishes educational grant programs to help bolster the work of other Latino Museums across the country and provide scholarship opportunities for students studying in the fields of Latino history, arts, and culture to help train a pipeline of talent to keep this history alive well into the future.

Passage of this bill will show that representation and inclusion matter. Latinos currently make up almost one-fifth of our population. We are the largest and second-fastest growing ethnic group. We have served in every American war and have made significant contributions in the world of sports, music, the arts, sciences, and beyond. From the American Revolution to the fight for civil rights, Latinos have been on the frontlines of history. These stories and heroes are often overlooked, but to deny their telling is to deny a very important part of what made this country what it is today.

In 2021, the Molina Latino Gallery will open at the American History museum. We thank Eduardo Diaz and his leadership at the Latino Center for it, but it is just a step. Hundreds of years of history, art, and culture cannot be contained in 4,500 square feet. These stories deserve a dedicated space of their own on “America’s Front Yard” to tell the FULL story of America.

I also want to acknowledge and thank my colleague and Republican co-lead, Congressman Will Hurd of Texas, who is here today. His leadership has led to an historic level of Republican support this year. At 219 co-sponsors and counting, this is a truly bipartisan effort.

Thank you, again, and especially to Chairman Grijalva for being one of the Latino Museum’s best champions. We have the momentum to get this done in the 116th Congress.